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ABSTRACT

Potential sources of volunteers over the age of 65 for tutoring in remedial or compensatory reading programs include retired teacher associations, local councils on aging, and local chapters of the American Association for Retired People. Personal contact is generally responsible for volunteers' participation in a tutorial program. When addressing or writing potential tutors, one should outline the need for one-to-one assistance for children with reading problems, typical tutorial tasks, the amount of training required, and the amount of time to be spent with children. Initial screening of volunteers should be conducted by a reading specialist who is also aware of some facets of gerontology, and should include inquiries about the volunteer's general health, previous educational training, and commitment to the tutorial program. When planning tutorial training, it is important to allow for suggestions from the classroom teacher, and to center tutor training on identified school needs, incorporating definitions of reading terms, reading instruction strategies, and school rules and procedures. Sessions should be scheduled so that students are not pulled out of classes they enjoy. When implementing the tutorial program, one should organize classroom space and procedures to assist smooth transitions and operations. Supervision and evaluation should focus on tutor progress as well as student progress, because a program with poorly trained tutors is more damaging than no program at all. (HTH)

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Before You Begin:

Feasibility of Aged Volunteers Tutoring Children in Reading

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The "back to basics" movement which developed during the late 1960's and mushroomed during the 1970's has resulted in a decline in social promotion and emphasis on remedial/compensatory reading programs. Utilization of volunteer and paraprofessional tutors is one possibility, with matured adults being considered as a viable source of tutors.

Feasibility studies examining senior citizens as reading tutors have focused on six topics:

I. Determining potential sources of retired volunteers;

II. Soliciting competent volunteers;

III. Screening volunteers;

IV. Training tutors;

V. Implementing the tutorial program;

VI. Evaluating the program.

I. DETERMINING POTENTIAL SOURCES OF AGED VOLUNTEERS

Potential sources of volunteers over 65 include retired teacher associations, local councils on aging, local church groups, and the local chapter of the American Association for Retired People (AARP). Over 7,000 teachers will retire in 1980 in Louisiana alone; most, if not all, will join the organization for retired teachers at both the local and state levels. Utilization of retired teachers as tutors would decrease training time, in most cases.

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II. SOLICITING AGED VOLUNTEERS AS PARTICIPANTS IN TUTORIAL PROGRAM

Personal contact is generally responsible for volunteers' participation in a tutorial program. In order to save time and money, address as many potential tutors as possible at one time. Outline the need for one-to-one assistance for children who have reading problems, typical tutorial tasks, the amount of training required, actual time with the students, and the benefits of supervision. If solicitations are mailed, be sure to emphasize the above points, but expect fewer acceptances. Be prepared to provide transportation to and from the schools, and, if at all possible, some form of renumeration: free lunch at the school, financial assistance, certificates of appreciation, perhaps an end-of-the year banquet.

III. SCREENING INITIAL VOLUNTEERS

Initial screening of volunteers should be conducted by a reading specialist who is also aware of some facets of gerontology. In an informal interview setting, inquire about the tutor's general health, both physical and mental, and previous educational training. A high school diploma may not be as important a consideration as are committment, personality, and understanding of children. Many senior citizens dropped out of school to help support their families during the Depression; manditory attendance policies were not enacted as law until the early 1940's. Education is one factor in accepting or rejecting a tutor; it is not the most important factor.

Attempt to determine the volunteer's committment to the tutorial program. The active noninstitutional aged person leads a very busy and productive life. Secure tutors who are willing to donate time consistently, who will be prompt, and who will continue tutoring for an extended period. Financial reimbursement for both the training sessions and tutoring is one of the best assurances that a tutor will become committed to a project. Grant monies for alternative remediation is available from both state and federal sources, including state departments of education and the National Institutes on Aging.

During the initial screening of the volunteers, try to determine if the volunteer has the personality characteristics needed to establish rapport with a student, and to tutor once rapport has been established: warmth, patience, and enthusiasm.

IV. TRAINING TUTORS

Mature adults employed as tutors can prove an effective means of meeting individual needs of young readers. Positively, they provide more frequent practice sessions, added adult contact, assistance in creating materials, and help in managing reading lessons. Negatively, they may distract a child from the task assigned, give incorrect phonics instruction, criticize slower readers, and take over responsibilities which belong to the teacher or children. Substantial investment of professional time has to go into preliminary training and continued supervision of tutors if good results are to be achieved. The teacher remains responsible for the instructional program; the tutor serves as reinforcer, motivator, model, and assistant.

When planning the tutorial training for senior citizens allow for the input of the classroom teacher. Conduct a school-wide needs assessment and ask specifically: How can a trained senior citizen best assist in particular classrooms? Center tutor training on identified needs, and be sure to incorporate into the tutor curriculum definitions of reading terminology, reading instruction strategies (perhaps the language experience approach), the role of the tutor in the classroom, and school rules and procedures. The Tutor's Handbook developed by the Right to Read National Reading Center, (Robbins, 1976) is a valuable aid for tutors and teachers alike.

Train for details. Be very specific about the tutorial procedures. Use specific learning materials and techniques that have clear steps or that develop a consistent learning strategy. Allow time for the tutors to practice the techniques taught. Teach the tutors to print in manuscript.

Once tutors begin working with children, plan specific progress checks so that both tutor and tutee will be aware of the progress made during tutoring. Teach the tutor how to assess the child's performance on a given task, and how to record the achievement on some type of progress chart.

Train for affective sensitivity. "How a child feels about reading is often more important than the reading skills he possesses" according to Dr. Bob Jerrolds of the University of Georgia. Be sure the tutor recognizes the need for helping the child to want to read, as well as for reinforcing skills learned.

V. IMPLEMENTING THE TUTORIAL PROGRAM

Successful implementation is dependent, to a large extent, on the participation of central office personnel, principals, classroom teachers, remedial reading teachers, tutors, and tutees. Prepare the staff for their participation in this program, and prepare the children in their role of tutee. All children must learn that adult volunteers in the classroom are there to advance learning, not merely to observe or play.

Plan for optimal physical arrangements. Organize classroom procedures to assist smooth transitions and operations as matured adults come, stay, and go. Make sure sufficient and varied materials are readily available. Provide optimal scheduling: a tutee who is pulled from his physical education, art, or music class is generally a disgruntled, reluctant participant.

Avoid placing unrealistic demands on the tutor. One-on-one instruction is generally the most effective, with the senior citizen spending thirty minutes twice a week with the student.

Adequate supervision by the teacher or a supervisor is essential to the success of this program. Supportive assistance, reassurance, and encouragement are necessary reinforcers for the aged volunteer, particularly at the beginning of the program. At least fifteen minutes weekly should be provided for

planning and coordinating the tutorial program, so that both tutor and teacher are aware of the plans for the upcoming week.

VI. EVALUATING THE PROGRAM

Summative and formative evaluation of the tutorial program is essential for a successful program. Evaluation should focus on both tutor and tutee progress: Was rapport established? Did the child's reading self-concept improve? Was reading gain measurable on either formal or informal assessment instruments? Do both tutor and tutee appears to enjoy the tutorial session? Evaluation should begin at the inception of the program, so that needed adjustments are ongoing.

In anticipation of possible crises, determine in advance how and who will dismiss tutors, if need be. A means of gracefully terminating the "help" of nonhelpful tutors is unfortunately a necessity. If the senior citizen and the child cannot establish rapport, if frustration mounts, or the tutor or tutee become too emotionally involved, then discontinuation of tutoring should be considered.

SUMMARY

Aged reading tutors can be extremely helpful in working with developmental, corrective, or remedial readers, but they may do more damage than good if they try to remediate the seriously disabled reader. Too often, sincere but relatively untrained tutors do little more for seriously disabled readers than keep them occupied. Untrained or minimally trained personnel should be used to help students who don't have problems, and for clerical or administrative tasks, giving the remedial reading teacher or classroom teacher more time to teach students with serious problems.

A poor tutorial program is worse than none. The frustration and disenchantment resulting from poorly-administered or poorly-taught programs are devastating to aged volunteers, to students, parents, and teachers alike.

There is no merit to starting and maintaining programs that don't have all the components needed for success (Smith, Otto, and Hansen, 1980). Careful planning results in a program beneficial to senior citizens, children and teachers, improved self-concept for both aged adults and children, increased appreciation for reading and increased communication between the old and young.

References

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